

3-1-2018

Learning from our mothers: examining the role of intergenerational knowledge transfer in advancing gender equity among Sri Lankan youth

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Recommended Citation

Ruvani Fonseka and Samantha Hurst. "Learning from our mothers: examining the role of intergenerational knowledge transfer in advancing gender equity among Sri Lankan youth" *The Lancet Global Health* (2018): S48. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X\(18\)30177-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(18)30177-3)

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Learning from our mothers: examining the role of intergenerational knowledge transfer in advancing gender equity among Sri Lankan youth

Ruvani Fonseka, Samantha Hurst

Abstract

Background In a 2013 survey, over half of Sri Lankan men and women expressed gender-inequitable attitudes that equated masculinity with violence, and femininity with obedience to men. High rates of gender-inequitable attitudes are a community-level risk factor for gender-based violence including rape and intimate partner violence. In Sri Lanka, public health practitioners focused on reducing the health disparities resulting from gender inequity need to better understand the processes by which gender-inequitable attitudes develop and how to prevent them. The goal of this research was to identify potential points of intervention at which appropriate programmes and policies could most effectively cultivate gender-equitable attitudes among young people in Sri Lanka.

Methods Over 9 months in 2016 and 2017, we interviewed more than 30 young adults in Sri Lanka to understand how their experiences helped them to develop their own gender identity, as well as to understand and respond to gender norms. Their responses were analysed using a grounded theory approach to explore which factors have most influenced the processes of gender norm learning, acceptance, or rejection throughout Sri Lankan young adults' lives.

Findings Many interviews focused on the impact of elder family members on the interviewee's perception and acceptance of gender norms. Many young adults who did not agree with gender-inequitable norms reported receiving advice from their parents or other elder relatives to disregard norms and pursue their own non-conforming interests. In one example, many non-working mothers insisted on their daughters working and becoming financially independent.

Interpretation Young people in Sri Lanka are repeatedly confronted by gender-inequitable attitudes in school, the media, politics, and society at large. However, family members can support youth to develop gender equitable attitudes and behaviours within this gender-inequitable society. Harnessing elders' positive wishes for their offspring's future may prove essential to advancing gender equity in the next generation of Sri Lankan adults. Even from gender-inequitable roles, parents may still support gender equity, and could be encouraged through public health interventions to support their children in realising their full potential. Elder family members are an untapped public health resource for advancing gender equity and reducing its related health disparities among Sri Lankan youth.

Funding 2016 Fulbright US Student Grant.

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Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

Published Online
March 15, 2018
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